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State Native Key Player in POW Rescue Mission Drama

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By Ray Robinson

The cast of characters includes several men who rose to the top echelons of the U.S. military, a mysterious ex-policeman who claims to have exposed two government murder plots, the publisher of a magazine for mercenaries, a Texas billionaire, the CIA and other assorted intelligence agencies.

The script calls for the rescue, by hook or by crook, of U.S. prisoners allegedly left behind in Southeast Asia when American military forces pulled out 12 years ago.

This script, unlike those of Sylvester Stallone and Chuck Norris, is being played out in real life. And for the last seven years, its characters have spent untold sums of money hatching plots and counter plots, all in search of at least one of the elusive prisoners.

The common thread among the diverse cast of characters, touching each of them in one way or another, is James Gordon "Bo" Gritz, a tough-talking, barrel-chested former Green Beret officer whose bold and thus far unsuccessful excursions into hostile Laos have made him a legend in his own time among the more militant factions of the POW/MIA movement.

A native of Enid, Gritz won a chest full of medals and a reputation for leading native mercenaries on daring and unconventional missions during the war in Indochina. He retired from the Army as a lieutenant colonel in 1978 and has since occupied himself developing prisoner rescue plans with names such as Lazarus, Grand Eagle and Velvet Hammer, which couldn't fail to capture the media's attention and the public's imagination.

The Gritz missions have given rise to others:

- One, which never got off the ground, was developed by a congressman who claims at one time to have had the support of President Reagan's national security adviser.

- The publisher of Soldier of Fortune magazine built his own camp inside Laos to search for U.S. prisoners.

- The government, it has been widely reported, has sent its own

teams of mercenaries into Laos in search of prisoners.

For the last two months, *The Oklahoman* has investigated the connections between Gritz, the government and the other factions of the POW/MIA movement, and the bold, sometimes bizarre and always unsuccessful operations that have been mounted into Laos.

Throughout his forays into Laos, including a 1982 mission that resulted in his arrest in Thailand, Gritz has claimed to have the support of various government agencies, including the CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) and a secretive Army unit known as the Intelligence Support Activity. However, the record on whether the government extended any support to Gritz is unclear.

The most frequently cited piece of evidence supporting Gritz' claim is an undated letter to him from Lt. Gen. Harold Aaron, a former deputy director of the DIA and chief of Army intelligence who died of a heart attack in 1980. In the letter, Aaron endorses Gritz' retirement from the military to pursue the POW issue through private channels and adds:

"Because of the politics involved, contact me only if you get in a spot with no way out. This thing is so sensitive it could result in a real inquisition if word leaked out that we were proceeding unofficially." The letter concludes, "Bo, destroy this and all other written communication between us."

Gritz contends that it was Aaron who visited him in Panama in 1976 and asked him to investigate the possibility that U.S. prisoners were still being held in Southeast Asia.

Of the letter, Gritz said in an interview with *The Oklahoman* last month, "Aaron did not need to do that. ... the reason Aaron did that at all is to maybe give me a warm feeling that I wasn't going to be put out on a limb and then have the limb sawed off."

But Aaron's immediate superior at the DIA, Air Force Lt. Gen. Eugene Tighe, said in an interview that he doubted the letter's authenticity.

Tighe said he had seen at least three different versions of the letter, the first of which was unsigned and written on Army three-star general stationery. That version first surfaced in 1984 in the syndicated column of reporter Jack Anderson.

The second version, Tighe said, was slightly different in composition but bore what purported to be Aaron's signature. And the third version, Tighe said, was similar to the second except that it was written on DIA stationery.

Tighe said he found it suspicious that Aaron, an intelligence professional, would put something so sensitive on paper and conclude with a dramatic line instructing Gritz to destroy it. "First of all," Tighe said, "that shows something about Bo, because Bo didn't destroy it, obviously."

Billionaire Denies Ties to Gritz

Like Gritz, Tighe has publicly stated that he believes U.S. prisoners are still being held in Southeast Asia.

But unlike Gritz, Tighe feels that any effort to rescue them is doomed unless it has the support, either public or covert, of the U.S. government.

Informed of Tighe's statements concerning the letter, Gritz said: "Makes no difference to me. Does he question the authenticity of the prisoners of war? Does he question the authenticity of H. Ross Perot's involvement?"

The involvement of Perot, a billionaire Dallas computer magnate, is an article of faith among Gritz supporters. Many activists in the POW movement support the establishment of an independent commission, chaired by Perot, to study the possibility that U.S. prisoners are still being held in Southeast Asia.

As Gritz told it during the interview, he was summoned to Perot's office sometime in early 1979. As they stood under an imposing bronze statue of actor John Wayne, Perot al-

legedly gave Gritz a mandate to resolve the POW issue.

Gritz claimed Perot told him: "Bo, I want you to go over to Southeast Asia. Do everything you have to do. Use whatever means you have to use."

Gritz said he returned from Southeast Asia with a plan to bring promising witnesses to the United States for polygraph tests, but that Perot rejected it.

Perot is a firm believer in the existence of American prisoners in Southeast Asia, but he denies that he ever solicited Gritz to tackle the problem.

"I never asked him to do anything. I met with him once at his request," Perot said in an interview. "So he and I don't have any ties."

Perot also said that bringing the prisoners home through an armed rescue mission seemed to be out of the question, because there appeared to be no solid intelligence as to where they are. "You're gonna have to negotiate them out," he said.

No Trade-Off, Ex-CIA Man Says

Gritz charged that the U.S. government, whether through incompetence or faint-heartedness, has repeatedly failed him and his men on rescue missions, or asked them to stand down after months of preparation.

All the while, he said, the stream of servicemen's bones from Southeast Asia has continued, with the government wiping its books clean of one missing serviceman after another.

"It's in every bureaucrat's ... best interest to keep it on a bone basis," he said. "I have never been in the bone business."

Gritz claimed, for instance, that in December 1981, Adm. Bobby Ray Inman, then deputy director of the CIA, had asked him to drop the POW issue, promising that the spy agency would devote its "fullest attention" to it if Gritz halted his operations. Gritz said he refused.

Inman, now retired from the Navy and chief executive of Micro-Electronics and Computer Technology Inc., denied that the meeting went as Gritz said. In a statement issued through a corporate spokesman, Inman said Gritz approached the CIA "with a proposal for some things that he wanted to do."

The CIA, Inman said, refused to

lend its support to Gritz' operations. Inman added that "there was no trade-off with Gritz on what the CIA would or wouldn't do in response for his not undertaking those actions."

Magazine Finds No Real Evidence

It was in November 1982, with the launching of the ill-fated POW rescue mission code named "Operation Lazarus," that Gritz burst upon the public scene, leading several Americans and more than a dozen local commandos from a base camp in Thailand across the Mekong River into Laos.

The group was ambushed in Laos and scrambled back across the river into Thailand, where word of their mission had leaked to the press and was even being carried on the Voice of America broadcasts being beamed into Laos. Gritz and four of his comrades landed in a Thai jail.

Lazarus wasn't the first Gritz operation but it was the one which made him a celebrity.

It also was the one which put him at odds with Robert K. Brown, the retired Army officer who publishes Soldier of Fortune, the Colorado-based magazine for adventurers.

At the time, Brown and the magazine were involved in their own project aimed at finding and freeing POWs, which was staffed in part by disaffected members of a previous Gritz operation. The following year, Soldier of Fortune put out a special issue with a scathing expose of Gritz' operation, and posed the question: "Bo Gritz: Hero or Huckster?"

Gritz charged that it was Brown and the magazine staff who learned of Operation Lazarus and leaked it to a reporter for the San Diego Union.

As a result of the report in the Union, Gritz claimed, the Voice of America even informed its Laotian listeners that his operation was targeted at the towns of Senphan and Gnommarat.

"Soldier of Fortune did release it. There's no question about it," Gritz said. "Brown was trying to figure out some way he could use it, because it was red hot."

Brown confirmed that he had passed the information to a reporter for the San Diego newspaper, but said that was not until the Gritz story had appeared in a Thai newspaper, the Bangkok Post.

He said Gritz's allegations against him were either a "misunderstanding of the true facts" or "a flat out lie that he has come up with simply to cover his own incompetence."

Brown denied that there was any grudge between him and Gritz. "I just think Gritz is a flake," he said.

"Nobody's trying to do a job on Gritz," said Tom Reisinger, the director of special projects for the magazine. "We didn't question his cause and we still don't. We question the methods that he used, in certain instances. But nobody's out to get."

A friend of Brown's, retired Army Maj. Gen. John K. Singlaub, estimated that the publisher had spent \$300,000 scouring refugee camps in Thailand for information on American prisoners in Laos.

At one point, Soldier of Fortune had even built its own covert base camp in Laos, code named Liberty City and manned by anti-communist Laotian guerrillas recruited by the magazine.

"We felt we had some very good leads," Reisinger said. But he said the operation failed to produce any "concrete evidence" that Americans were being held prisoner there.

"We did nothing illegal," said Reisinger, who crossed the border into Laos at least five times himself.

"We did not cross any borders with weapons or anything like that."

Other Efforts In the Works

But Gritz and Soldier of Fortune hardly had the field to themselves.

In May 1981, the U.S. government, under criticism from activists in the POW movement, dispatched a team of Laotian mercenaries across the border to reconnoiter a site where satellite and reconnaissance photography had reportedly suggested some of the prisoners may have been held. The mission failed to produce evidence that Americans were imprisoned at the camp.

Meanwhile, another plan, hatched by U.S. Rep. John LeBoutillier, a New York Republican and leading activist on the POW issue, was in the works.

LeBoutillier, who was in the House of Representatives from 1981 to 1983, said he had convinced then-National Security Adviser William P. Clark to use money from the coffers of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration to

buy the prisoners' way out of Laos.

The plan called for the DEA, which had agents in Southeast Asia and access to large amounts of cash, to give the money to LeBoutillier's organization, known as "Save Our POW/MIAs," which would make the pay-offs.

LeBoutillier said Clark endorsed the operation because "he thought it was a good plan where we could circumvent the CIA, which he did not want to deal with, and get government money to get the POWs out privately so if there was any embarrassment, the government wouldn't have to take it."

But Clark, whom LeBoutillier called "a good guy and a patriot," became secretary of the interior in 1983 and was succeeded by Robert McFarlane. LeBoutillier said McFarlane, who has since stepped down as national security adviser, canceled the operation.

Before leaving the post last year, McFarlane made an ostensibly off-the-record speech to a private business group in which he said he believed Americans were still being held in Southeast Asia. LeBoutillier tape recorded McFarlane's remarks and released the tape to the Wall Street Journal.

Tighe has frequently said that there would be nothing wrong in paying what would amount to a ransom for the return of U.S. prisoners.

If such a plan could not be carried out through official channels, he said, a private entity could be used as an intermediary to cover the government's involvement.

"I think John LeBoutillier was attracted to that idea," Tighe said.

Circumstances Described Differently

It was about 18 months before the Lazarus debacle that Gritz' path crossed that of Scott Barnes, a freelance adventurer and former private police officer, who has emerged as one of the most controversial and shadowy figures to become involved in private rescue efforts.

The two men differ on the circumstances of their meeting; Gritz claims that Barnes came to him, and Barnes says it was the other way around. Barnes, in a court affidavit on file in North Carolina, said Gritz contacted him seeking an introduction to a former Laotian general named Vang

Pao, who commanded the CIA's secret mercenary army in Laos during the war and is now living in the United States.

Gritz, in an interview, said Barnes approached him unsolicited, saying that Vang Pao wanted to see him.

When the two men finally did get together, Gritz recalled, they tried unsuccessfully to settle the question of just where Barnes had come from.

"I thought he's your guy," Vang Pao reportedly said. Gritz replied, "No, general, he's *your* guy."

Gritz claimed that the eager Barnes never accompanied him on any of his missions to Southeast Asia. Barnes, however, maintains that he went to Thailand and crossed into Laos with a man identified as "Mike J. Baldwin" and 30 native members of a Gritz reconnaissance team.

About 27 kilometers inside Laos, Barnes claimed, the team came upon a prison camp occupied by men he described as "clearly Caucasian."

Barnes said the team then retreated into Thailand, where it learned Gritz was no longer in charge of the operation.

He said he was informed that the U.S. embassy in Thailand had sent the team instructions "that if the presence of Caucasian(s) was confirmed at this location that the 'merchandise was to be liquidated.'"

At that point, Barnes said, he dropped out of the operation and returned to the United States.

That incident was the second time Barnes had gone public with allegations of a government murder plot.

Earlier, Barnes had charged that the CIA had asked him to kill Honolulu financier Ronald L. Rewald, who was defending himself against fraud charges by claiming that the spy agency was using his company as a front.

ABC News broadcast Barnes' charges and, in an unprecedented move, the CIA filed a fairness complaint against the network with the Federal Communications Commission. ABC had already acknowledged in a follow-up report that it could not confirm Barnes' allegations, and the CIA's complaint was dismissed.

As he plots his next move from his home in the Nevada desert, Gritz looks back on a series of unsuccessful missions and places much of the blame on the U.S. government.

Recalling all the mix-ups and missed chances, Gritz says, "I can see

that there may have been a real nigger in the woodpile here. Enough so that our next effort is going to be sans any liaison (with the government)."